

State of South Carolina's Coastal Resources

Black Sea Bass Update



Introduction

Along the continental shelf of the southeastern United States, areas of live bottom (sponge, soft coral, and algal growth) in depths from 60-150 ft provide habitat for the black sea bass ("blackfish") populations that support important commercial and recreational fisheries. Juvenile black sea bass are found in coastal estuaries on oyster reefs, and around jetties and piers, but most fishing takes place on offshore natural and man-made reefs. Black sea bass are one of the main targets of recreational anglers who fish on the bottom near artificial reefs, and the species supports commercial hook-and-line and trap (sea bass pot) fisheries on natural reefs. Managed by federal fishery management agencies as part of the "Snapper-Grouper Complex", black sea bass are subject to intense fishing pressure and were recently (2005) declared overfished.

Commercial Fishery Harvest

Black sea bass have historically supported a regional offshore fishery with landings in South Carolina showing a cyclical pattern of periods of high and low catches (Figure 1). The value per pound has increased substantially since 1980, with fishermen being paid over \$1.50 per pound in the two most recent years. Although the landings have been cyclical, there had been a steady decline in commercial landings since the last peak in 1990. The decline in catches may be due to overfishing.

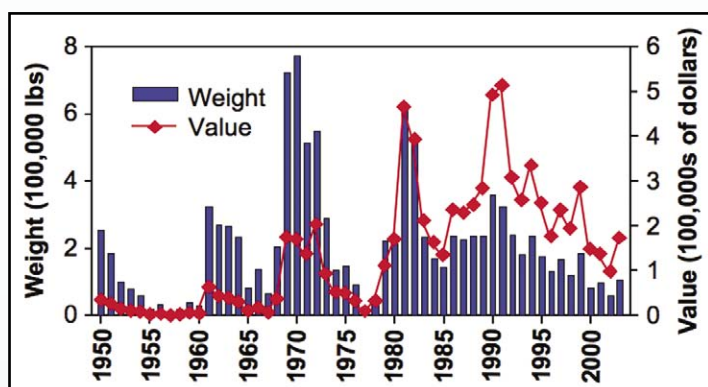


Figure 1. South Carolina commercial black sea bass landings in pounds and dollars.

Recreational Fishery Harvest

Black sea bass are a favorite target of head boats (party boats that charge by the head for a full or half day fishing) and other recreational fishing boats on natural and artificial reefs. Recreational catches of black sea bass also have been cyclical, and the down-

ward trend in catches since 1991 parallels that in the commercial sector (Figure 2).

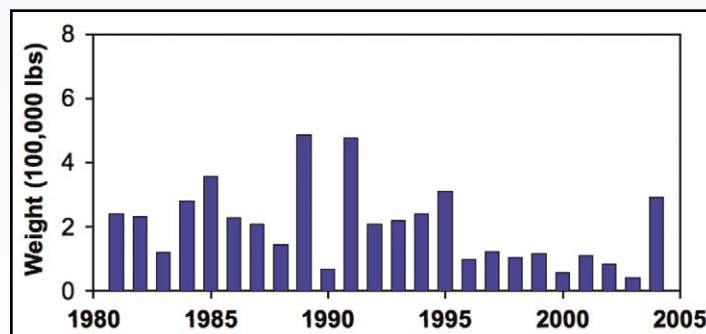


Figure 2. South Carolina recreational black sea bass landings in pounds.

Fishery Independent Sampling

Numbers of black sea bass in MARMAP (Marine Resources Monitoring, Assessment and Prediction) fish trap catches increased in 2004, and were near the 17-year average (Figure 3). Catches in 2004 were well below the maximum reported in 1999.

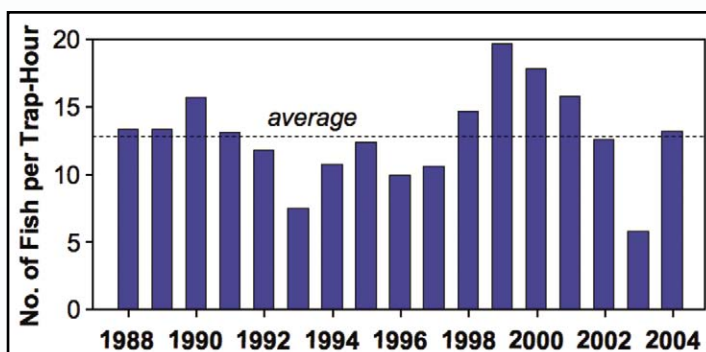


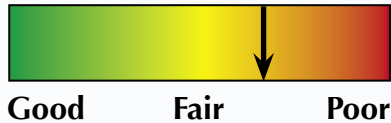
Figure 3. Number of black sea bass caught per trap per hour in MARMAP fish trap surveys.

Overall Condition of the Stock and Status of Management

Although fishery-independent catches for 2004 were near the 17-year average, black sea bass is classified by federal fishery managers as overfished and undergoing overfishing. The most recent stock assessment found that the biomass of black sea bass has been stable since around 1990, although the biomass is only about 25% of the amount in an unfished population. The population has therefore been overfished since about 1990. Long-term

commercial landings data indicate that more recent catches are well below the catches recorded in the early 1970s.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council has proposed additional restrictions on the commercial fishery for black sea bass for the region from North Carolina to Florida, to include a 347,000 pound commercial quota; raising the minimum size from 10 to 11 inches, requiring 2-inch mesh in sea bass pots and establishing a fishing year from 1 June through 31 May. Additional regulations on the recreational fishery include a proposed 15 fish-per-trip catch limit, 12-inch minimum size and 459,000 lb recreational catch limit for the region.



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